

RUSSIA VS. UKRAINE: A SUBALTERN EMPIRE AGAINST THE “POPULISM OF HOPE”

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Abstract

This article discusses the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine from a postcolonial perspective. It argues that the structure of coloniality in the region is tripartite: besides Russia and Ukraine, the “West” is present as the main significant Other for both sides. With regard to the West, Russia is a “subaltern empire” and Ukraine is a “double subaltern,” peripheral to more than one center of power. Within this complex of imperialism and subalternity, Russia is engaging in a “catching-up imperialism” driven by resentment against the West. Russia has subsumed neighboring states, or parts of them, in brutal violation of the existing international order. Its leaders claim it is only mimicking the hegemon’s (i.e. the West’s) imperialist modus operandi. This geostrategic pattern is captured by Erik Ringmar’s notion of “recognition games.” Fighting in those “deadly games,” Zelensky’s Ukraine is breaking out of its place as a mute subaltern. The rhetorical aspect of Ukraine’s response to Russian aggression can be called a horizontal “populism of hope.” Ukraine has attained global visibility and recognition in the Northern hemisphere as a beacon of grassroots democracy, resilience and freedom. Russia, however, has rebranded itself as the spearhead of a global fight against Western hegemony. The outcome of this military and discursive standoff will largely define a future normative international order displaying new hierarchies of symbolic power.

Keywords: postcolonialism; catching-up imperialism; populism of hope; recognition games; normative order; Ukraine; Russia

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Introduction: A Tripartite Structure of Coloniality, or Ukraine and Russia Under the Western Gaze

As soon as the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, international experts started looking for theoretical frameworks into which to fit it, predominantly focusing on the geopolitical and security issues. Putin's infamous speech defending his decision to invade put forth two justifications, one dwelling on the "fault of the West" for expanding NATO's borders eastwards after the end of the Cold War, and the other denying the existence of the Ukrainian nation itself. In his speech, Putin went at great length into alleged historical wrongdoings that resulted in the emergence of the Ukrainian state.¹ Putin's two justifications were the basis for the main objective of Russia's "special military operation": the "de-militarization" and "de-Nazification" of Ukraine.² Finding fault with NATO's expansion was a handy argument for Putin's sympathizers to rationalize his actions. However, Putin's argument about Ukraine's legitimacy was drenched in the rhetoric of conspiracy, which opened up the possibility that the Russian leadership was an irrational geopolitical actor. The very fact of the invasion questioned a rational explanation, given that a full-blown military assault on its face was not beneficial to Russia's state interests, whether geopolitical or geoeconomic.

This bit of context explains renewed interest among scholars in alternatives to realist approaches to analyzing Russia's foreign policy. As Erik Ringmar argues in a breakthrough article, "states not only pursue their 'national interest', but also – and before anything else – they seek to establish identities for themselves."³ He calls campaigning for an identity "recognition games," in which states that perceive themselves as lagging behind their counterparts in the world strive to improve their geopolitical standing using all available means, peaceful or military. In other words, the international struggle is not primarily about "who should get what" but instead about "*who should be who*."⁴

¹ "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 21, 2022, official website of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

² "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022, official website of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>.

³ Erik Ringmar, "The Recognition Game. Soviet Russia against the West", *Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association* 37, no. 2 (2002): 115–136, here 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

From that perspective, Russia has always been seeking to establish its identity as an equal power in its competition with the Euro-Atlantic “West.”⁵ Madina Tlostanova calls Russia “the Janus-faced empire” because it is itself “Orientalized” by the West. She says Russian policy toward its subalterns is influenced by a “caricature secondary Orientalism,” by which it attempts to compensate for an “inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe.”⁶ The importance of Ukraine to Russia’s self-identity exceeds that of an internal colony that simply provides resources for imperial adventures.⁷ It also represents an “internal West” that must be subjugated, controlled, and incorporated to prove both the empire’s grandeur and its Europeanness. Without the westernmost lands of the former Russian empire, contemporary Russia is a largely Eurasian entity with vast natural treasures but less symbolic capital.

The main objective of this research is to develop a postcolonial vocabulary for analyzing the Russian war in Ukraine. This vocabulary must account for the specific tripartite structure of coloniality in the region, where Russia’s imperial expansion and the anti-colonial resistance to it unfold under the Western gaze. Arguably, Russia’s objective is obtaining recognition as a world power at eye level with global players. For that reason, the West is directly implicated in this war: since the primary goal of Russia’s military endeavor is gaining global recognition, any attempts to refrain from engagement with Russia, as promoted by various “peace” supporters, would arguably goad Russia to further escalation until the recognition it seeks is achieved or is utterly lost. Moreover, Russia cannot achieve the full recognition it desires from a subaltern position to the West. Any concessions the latter might make would likely entail a further raising of the stakes – that is, Russia would have to make even higher-level demands.

Various structural positions on the scale of colonial difference and alternative visions of the world order attached to them will be discussed in this paper. The Russian leadership apparently initiated the war in Ukraine in order to disrupt a symbolic order with which it was uncomfortable. The Ukrainian authorities seemed to be doomed to a reactive position, being forced to fight for their

⁵ The words “Russia” and “Ukraine” are used in the article as shorthand for their ruling elites and their strategies, whereas the “West” is used as a loose collective noun meaning an otherwise quite heterogenous ensemble of states in the Global North. I chose the latter term due to its broad currency in Russian (and, to a lesser extent, Ukrainian) public discourse.

⁶ Madina Tlostanova, “The Janus-faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race, and Religion in the Russian/(post)Soviet Constructions of the ‘Orient,’” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* (Spring 2008): 1–11, here 2.

⁷ Cf. Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

country's very existence. Counter to that, Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, has seized a proactive position from which he is actively seeking to define the global agenda for confronting Russia's aggression.

I shall proceed as follows. First, I will describe the theoretical premises of the present study by introducing the concepts of a "subaltern empire" and a "double subaltern" nation. In the case of Ukraine, Russia seems to be operating with a resentful, imitative imperialism that mimics the Western hegemon's military and normative expansionism. I will then focus on Putin's rhetoric, his anti-Western sentiment and his justifications for the war as presumably replicating the U.S. justifications for its military incursions, and the Western *modus operandi* overall. The paradox inherent in the position of Russia as a subaltern empire will be highlighted in that context. The next part of this paper focuses on Volodymyr Zelensky's public rhetoric after 24 February 2022. It argues that his public speeches exhibit a successful attempt to escape Ukraine's position as a "double subaltern," to fight Russia discursively, and to revamp the existing hierarchies of domination. The paper will put forward a vision of a future world based on the concepts here discussed. I will conclude by noticing a shift in Putin's recent rhetoric, which has started to emulate Zelensky's agenda. This may represent a tactical victory for Ukraine, but it harbors further challenges for a future normative order.

Theoretical Framework: Recognition Games in the Post-Soviet Terrain

A postcolonial approach to Russian–Ukrainian relations started emerging in academia right after the breakup of the Soviet Union. This appeared in literary studies⁸ but also in social and political thought.⁹ Vitaly Chernetsky remarks, "Of all the subjects of the former Russian empire, Ukraine has had one of the most complicated and difficult relationships with the metropoly. Its subaltern, marginalized position was also reflected in the similarly subaltern and marginalized position of Ukrainian studies vis-à-vis Russian studies in the West."¹⁰ Chernetsky

⁸ Marko Pavlyshyn, "Ukrainian Literature and the Erotics of Postcolonialism: Some Modest Propositions," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 17, no. 1–2 (June 1993): 110–126; Myroslav Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Vitaly Chernetsky, "Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine," *Ubandus Review* 7 (2003), Empire, Union, Center, Satellite: The Place of Post-Colonial Theory in Slavic/Central and Eastern European/(Post-)Soviet Studies: 32–62.

⁹ Mykola Riabchuk, *Dvi Ukrayiny: real'ni mezhi, virtual'ni vijny* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2003).

¹⁰ Chernetsky, "Postcolonialism," 37.

goes on to compare the “brutal and lengthy history of colonial suppression of the Ukrainian culture in the Russian empire” with England’s domination of Ireland, where the colonial model melded with the provincial model because of the assimilation and cooptation of the Irish elites (and the mass extinction of those who resisted to it). Mykola Riabchuk emphasizes the “othering” and social/cultural racism practiced by Russians, where the ethnic marker is conflated with the social one in order to ridicule the Ukrainians as a “peasant nation.” This attitude is captured in the pejorative label, *khokhol* [presumably, referring to the traditional hairstyle of Ukrainian Cossacks, with offensive stereotypes attached to it], applied by Russians to Ukrainians.¹¹ Riabchuk paraphrases the title of a book by French political philosopher Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* as “white skin, black language” as he argues that the structure of cultural oppression between Russia and Ukraine is similar to European coloniality, despite the absence of the racial angle.¹²

Russia’s all-out invasion of February 2022 was quickly dubbed “a colonial war” in the West. Timothy Snyder argues that “Putin took a pronounced colonial turn when returning to the Presidency a decade ago. In 2012, he described Russia as a ‘state-civilization,’ which by its nature absorbed smaller cultures such as Ukraine’s.”¹³ Indeed, the Russian war of aggression appears to be based on an urge to recapture Ukrainian land, which corresponds to the logic of imperial territorial expansion. The newly acquired (occupied) lands in Ukraine are immediately and forcibly assimilated: billboards with iconic figures like Pushkin and Suvorov were erected in the streets of Kherson under Russian occupation, and special summer classes with the Russian curriculum were set up for local children.¹⁴ Forced relocation of Ukrainians to Russia and legally questionable adoptions of Ukrainian children by Russian families are examples of the extraction of human resources to fill some demographic gaps in Russia.

Russia–Ukraine tensions spilled over in 2022 to threaten nothing less than the existing global order. Russian spin-doctors interpret the “special military

¹¹ Mykola Riabchuk, “Ukrainians as Russia’s Negative ‘Other’: History Comes Full Circle,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49 (2016): 75–85, doi: 10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.003

¹² Riabchuk, *Dvi Ukrayiny*, 60–67.

¹³ Timothy Snyder, “The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War,” *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war>.

¹⁴ Alina Olikhovs’ka, “Okupanty v Khersoni rozkleyily propahandysts’ki bilbordy: absurdni foto,” *24 kanal*, May 30, 2022, https://24tv.ua/okupanti-hersoni-rozkleyili-propagandistski-bilbordi-absurdni_n1991218. “Himn Rosiyyi ta uroky rosijs’koyu: okupanty ‘vidkryly’ shkolu v osadzhennomu Mariupoli,” *Vil’ne Radio*, April 19, 2022, <https://freeradio.com.ua/himn-rosii-ta-uroky-rosiiskoju-okupanty-vidkryly-shkolu-v-osadzhennomu-mariupoli/>.

operation” as a war against the “collective West,” conducted on the territory of Ukraine. For those reasons, the colonial lens through which we view Russian actions must be refined to account for these important changes. The notion that Russia is a “subaltern empire,” most extensively elaborated by Viatcheslav Morozov, has heuristic potential in that context.¹⁵ The structure of domination in Eastern Europe is tripartite: the imagined “West” is the main significant Other that wields the symbolic power of recognition, based on its cumulative political, economic, and cultural clout. Late twentieth century revisionist interpretations of Europe’s complicated colonial legacy vis-à-vis the global South did not concern themselves with the states on Europe’s eastern periphery, which were largely perceived as second-rate Europeans.¹⁶ Ironically, the recent rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe was in part fueled by that perception, but also it further reinforced it. The imperial/colonial difference in Europe¹⁷ seems to suggest only the *catching-up logic* of development for its eastern part, in which the frustrations generated by catching-up democratization and modernization can lead to a kind of catching-up imperialism. Russia is pioneering the latter and seeking like-minded allies within the EU.

Applying political psychology to international relations explains why the hunger for recognition is insatiable. Subalternity is rooted in self-colonization, or an inferiority complex, and purely external actions taken by others cannot eliminate it. Erik Ringmar observes that the Soviet Union repeatedly raised the stakes: every act of recognition on the part of the collective West simply resulted in a higher-level demand – from recognition as a “legitimate state” to a “great power,” and then to a “superpower.”¹⁸ One might take heed that although Russia’s dissatisfaction with the existing hierarchies may be the root cause of present tensions, historically, concessions to aggressive revisionists never bear fruit.

Within this complex of imperialism arising from subalternity, Russia engages in “catching-up imperialism.” It subsumes all or part of neighboring states in brutal violation of the existing international order. In that way, it allegedly mimics

¹⁵ Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia’s Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in the Eurocentric World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁶ Cf. Attila Meleg, *On the East – West Slope. Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Central and Eastern Europe* (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Manuela Boatcă and Anca Parvulescu, “Creolizing Transylvania: Notes on Coloniality and Inter-Imperiality,” *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 10, no. 1 (April 2020): 9–27, doi: 10.1215/21599785-8221398.

¹⁸ Ringmar, “The Recognition Game.”

the hegemon's modus operandi.¹⁹ Russian history provides multiple examples of keeping up with the great powers by mimicking their behavior within the hegemonic logic set by them. In the history of Russia, that logic has included the logic of antiquization in medieval times (seeing Russia as an ancient empire rooted in the Kyivan Rus), the logic of industrialization and technological progress in the twentieth century (the armaments race and the space race), and the logic of "responsibility to protect" in the post-Cold War period (taking military control of areas with Russian-speakers while sidestepping international institutions).²⁰ Russia's quest for hegemony has always been accompanied by attempts to prove that it is "a better Europe," superior to the "rotten" states of the West that have allegedly betrayed European ideals.²¹ Russian *messianism* assuages the humiliation of lagging behind the West and displaces the hegemon in its alleged "hegemonic decline."

In the wake of the current war, Russian officials have made repeated references to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 as justifications for Russian aggression. These comparisons are not just whataboutism. They are the standard of true hegemony that Russia aims to live up to. The inherent paradox of this strategy of legitimization is aptly described by Tlostanova: "It is symptomatic for the subaltern empire, which even claiming the global spiritual and transcendental superiority is still looking for the approval and love of the West."²² On the one hand, Putin attempts to rise above international

¹⁹ Danijela Čanji and Aliaksei Kazharski, "When the 'Subaltern Empire' Speaks: On Recognition, Eurasian Integration, and the Russo-Georgian War," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (February 2022), doi: 10.1080/15387216.2022.2040375.

²⁰ Quite symptomatically, Ukraine was in the crosshairs of all of those attempts: 1) not only did the intellectual elites from Kyiv help in rebranding Muscovy into the Russian empire in the eighteenth century, but they also promoted the legacy of Kyivan Rus' and Christianity to prove the ancient roots of the empire (Serhii Plokhyy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation* [New York: Basic Books, 2017]; 2) the exploitation of the agricultural potential of the fertile Ukrainian lands through forced collectivization and confiscation of grain crops provided the material foundations for Stalin's project of industrialization, even if it resulted in the mass famine in Ukraine known as the Holodomor (Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* [New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2016]); 3) the Russian leadership compares its current military intervention in Ukraine with interventions of the United States in the Middle East and North Africa (Čanji and Kazharski, "When the 'Subaltern Empire' Speaks").

²¹ "During the nineteenth century, the Russian state represented itself as 'true Europe' in a situation where the rest of Europe had failed the best in its own tradition by turning away from the past values of the anciens regimes. During the twentieth century, the Russian state represented itself as 'true Europe' in a situation where the rest of Europe had failed the best in its own tradition by not turning to the future values of socialism" (Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* [Abingdon: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2016], 184).

²² Tlostanova, "The Janus-Faced Empire," 2.

law, by which he wants to manifest Russia's sovereignty. On the other, he seeks recognition from the West. By that token, he inadvertently reinforces his subordinate position and his dependence on the Other.

The "recognition games" approach for analyzing international conflicts prioritizes symbolic capital over other kinds of capital. By putting greater value on recognition than on material gains and losses, the Kremlin elite is less vulnerable to economic sanctions than the EU elites. This enables it to weaponize the market logic of economic interdependence against the West, which results in what Mark Leonard calls "the fall of Davos man."²³ The war with Ukraine is a game-changer because it moves the global community from the win-win game of mutual trading to the zero-sum game of achieving recognition. Those who still prefer material profit over strategic objectives lose the game.

Ukraine, for its part, is attempting to escape the position of a double subaltern imposed on it from both sides. The initial stages of Russian aggression in 2014 were met with anti-colonial rhetoric in Kyiv. In tune with that rhetoric, then-President Poroshenko attempted to invert the hierarchies of domination, portraying Ukraine as the shield of the civilized world, protecting the West from attacks by Russia, a chaotic, uncivilized Asian power. Poroshenko's anti-colonial political agenda of "the army, the language, and the faith" was ardently supported only by roughly a quarter of Ukrainian society – generally the most active part. The majority of Ukrainians preferred a more conciliatory approach to Russia, associated with Zelensky's presidential candidacy in 2019. The latter's landslide victory can be interpreted as a mandate to break the obsessive fixation on Russia as the oppressor, which, in a way, picks up on the spirit of the Maidan of 2013–2014. Ilya Gerasimov persuasively argues that the Maidan demonstrations were not anti-colonial but post-colonial, because they were aimed at "reinvention of [a] positive, 'post-transition' sense of belonging" and a "quest for a new collective self not in the invented past or someone else's present, but in the unknown future."²⁴ This new Ukrainian self-perception was not based on any pre-existing identity but on a new, performatively established one – hybrid, horizontal, and inclusive: the community that emerged out of the Maidan was built on horizontal networks, and it incorporated Ukrainians

²³ Mark Leonard, "The Decline and Fall of Davos Man," *Project Syndicate*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/fall-of-davos-man-geopolitics-replacing-globalization-by-mark-leonard-2022-05>.

²⁴ Ilya Gerasimov, "Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution," *Ab Imperio* no. 3 (2014): 22–44, 23.

of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, united around shared values and visions for the polity's future.

When Poroshenko's rhetoric degenerated into a binary anti-colonialism, Zelensky picked up on the demand of the Maidan and re-framed it in a populist way. He refrained from revisionary condemnation of the past in favor of future-oriented rhetoric. He conspicuously avoided defaming the Kremlin authorities.²⁵ To this day, the defining features of Zelensky's rhetoric is positive emotional mobilization, horizontality, and inclusivity. After Russia began its full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian president expanded his audience beyond the state borders while retaining his main themes: hope, solidarity, humanism. Most importantly, he is now engaging with world leaders on par, ignoring geopolitical hierarchies and building the chain of equivalence of "Ukraine, Europe, the world."²⁶ Thus, instead of pleading for recognition, he speaks from a position that assumes Ukraine deserves attention. He horizontally connects developments in Ukraine to a larger scheme that will define the world's future.

To conclude, given the revisionist goals Russia has for this war, broader questions arise about the future of the European project and the foundations of the global order. Will we return to a world of great powers, where small nation-states are forced to bandwagon with the powerful ones and electorates simply affirm pre-determined policies when they cast a ballot? Is military intervention in a sovereign neighbor-state an acceptable tool for elevating one's geopolitical status? Is it feasible to reinforce democratic values as the benchmark in international relations? Can Europe preserve its unity against the attempts of various actors to exacerbate its internal cleavages? Those questions go far beyond the scope of this article but they should be kept in mind as we zoom in on the public rhetoric coming from the Kremlin and Bankova street in Kyiv. The leaders of the two warring countries are not addressing each other so much as the international audience, and they both would like to be validated by it. The public sphere is the battlefield on which a future normative order with new hierarchies of symbolic power will be negotiated. The more Zelensky gains the sympathies of the West, the more actively Putin engages the global South with widely-shared anti-U.S.

²⁵ Valeria Korablyova, "Why Zelenskyi Is Downplaying the Threat of Escalation in Ukraine," *ZOiS Spotlight*, #5, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/why-zelenskyi-is-downplaying-the-threat-of-escalation-in-ukraine>.

²⁶ Volodymyr Zelensky, "Russian Evil Will Lose When Our Peace Formula Prevails — Speech by the President of Ukraine at the Meeting of the Leaders of the European Political Community, October 6, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/rosijske-zlo-prograye-koli-nasha-formula-miru-peremozhe-vist-78329>.

sentiments. The outcome of this discursive fight is far from settled. It will not only be determined by Ukraine's military success or failure, but also by developments elsewhere, most importantly, by a looming confrontation between the United States and China.

Russia: An Imitative Imperialism of Resentment

The speech by Vladimir Putin aired on February 24, 2022 fits neatly into the logic of Russia as a subaltern empire. At first glance, it is striking that the speech was delivered on the first day of the invasion, as multiple rockets were striking Ukrainian targets across the country, but Putin barely mentioned Ukraine at all: its name pops up only in the sixteenth minute of the 28-minute speech, with a reference to the Donbas. The speech focused instead on the U.S.-led collective West, calling it an “empire of lies” and identifying its neglect of Russia as the *casus belli*.²⁷ The structure of the speech is indicative. Putin starts from a place of resentment and a sense of humiliation. His word choices (“hypocrisy,” “arrogance,” “cynical deception”) reflect political psychology and postcolonial studies rather than international relations realism:

I will begin with (...) the fundamental threats that irresponsible Western politicians created consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year. (...) Where did this insolent manner of talking down from the height of their exceptionalism, infallibility and all-permissiveness come from? What is the explanation for this contemptuous and disdainful attitude to our interests and absolutely legitimate demands?²⁸

Putin blamed the United States and its “satellites” for succumbing to “a state of euphoria created by the feeling of absolute superiority, a kind of modern absolutism, coupled with the low cultural standards and arrogance of those who formulated and pushed through decisions that suited only themselves.” He also implies that the West’s disdain of Russia is based on a “monopoly on civilization” it allegedly claims: “the so-called civilized world, which our Western colleagues proclaimed themselves the only representatives of.”²⁹

Putin proceeded to list U.S. interventions that bypassed international institutions and resolutions. The bombing of Belgrade in 1999 seems to Putin to be

²⁷ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022.

the turning point, the most traumatic international event since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He made several points: the “bloody operation” was waged “without the UN Security Council’s sanction (...) in the heart of Europe”; the bombing of “peaceful cities and vital infrastructure went on for several weeks”; Putin’s “Western colleagues [still] (...) prefer to avoid speaking about international law, instead emphasizing the circumstances which they interpret as they think necessary.”³⁰ These complaints set the template for Russia to follow when listing its excuses for the invasion. Putin reinforces his thesis with reference to the invasion of Iraq on the pretext of chemical weapons being developed in Iraqi laboratories. However plausible those accusations may be, I suggest focusing on the fact that they were used to justify an attack on Ukraine, one that Putin framed not as a war but as a “special military operation,” that is being conducted under false pretenses in the heart of Europe. When it comes to Ukraine, the Kremlin leadership mimics the hegemon almost *ad litteram* – massively shelling cities and their populations (as NATO did in Belgrade in 1999), advancing allegations of bioweapons development in Ukraine under U.S. guidance, and, most importantly, taking action without any regard for international institutions, international law, and multilateral agreements.

Danijela Čanji and Aliaksei Kazharski rightly point out that Russia’s putative “humanitarian interventions” in Georgia and elsewhere under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russian population demonstrate no concern of international legal norms, because the Russian authorities perceive that as “the great power privilege.”³¹ Morozov says this is consistent with the logic of a “subaltern empire,” where Russia is “almost completely dependent on the West in both economic and normative terms, and (...) is increasingly trying to justify its foreign policy conduct by accusing the West [of] neocolonialism.”³² At the infamous meeting of the Russian Security Council televised on February 21, 2022, the commander-in-chief of the National Guard troops of the Russian Federation, Viktor Zolotov, went so far as to claim that “we do not border on Ukraine, we have no border with Ukraine. This is the Americans’ border, because they are the masters in that country, while the Ukrainians are their vassals.”³³ Putin agrees that Ukraine “has turned not even into a political or economic protectorate but has been reduced

³⁰ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

³¹ Čanji and Kazharski, “When the ‘Subaltern Empire’ Speaks”, 17.

³² Viatcheslav Morozov, “Subaltern Empire?” *Problems of Post-Communism* 60, no. 6 (2013): 16–28, here 16, doi: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216600602.

³³ “Security Council Meeting,” February 21, 2022, official website of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825>.

to a colony with a puppet regime.”³⁴ Ukraine, he accuses, has been “taken hostage” against Russia and the Russian people.³⁵

The next chapter of Putin’s February 24 speech makes the Kremlin’s goals even more clear. It provides a list of events where the Russian authorities could rightfully secure their power and support their loyal allies by taking military measures in Chechnya, Syria, and, most recently, in Kazakhstan. Defending that understanding of sovereignty is the ultimate goal of the war in Ukraine – the right to use violent means against dissenting entities within Russia or its neighbors, without constraint by foreign partners. The necessity to preserve Russia’s “sphere of influence” is hard-wired into the undisturbed authoritarian governance of the country.

The following part of Putin’s address brags about the resources that prop up his ambitions: “Today’s Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons.” This is followed by threats against anyone who might consider intervening: “No matter who tries to stand in our way (...), they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.”³⁶

Putin’s entire discourse constructs the position of Russia as an unhappy Western subaltern – largely self-colonized – that aspires to a hegemony of its own (and that has enough resources to obtain it). However, his desire for recognition from the hegemon only fixates Russia’s subalternity. The crucial question is whether any coherent foreign policy can be constructed from the position of a subaltern empire, or is Russia doomed to wedding two irreconcilable agendas – forging an alternative world order (the “empire” part) and seeking recognition from the international community (the “subaltern” part). Putin concluded his speech with two points that illustrate this inherent contradiction. On the one hand, he affirms one of his favorite notions, that Russia is simply defending its sovereignty by unleashing warfare on Ukraine (“It is our strength and our readiness to fight that are the bedrock of independence and sovereignty”). At the same time, he wraps this decision in self-pitying rhetoric about being forced into action by circumstances (“We had no other choice (...). They did not leave us any other option.”³⁷)

³⁴ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022.

³⁵ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Imagining themselves to be game-changers in the international arena, top Russian officials are fighting de facto for a better position in the existing hierarchies that have already been defined by others. Ex-president Medvedev demonstrates this when he says: “Let us face it, Russia means a lot more than Ukraine for the international community and our friends in the United States and the European Union, and everyone understands this, including the Ukrainians.”³⁸

Another important trope in Kremlin officials’ speeches is the lack of agency of minor actors, i.e., small nation-states and the citizenry outside of high office. They treat the “disobedience” of neighboring states towards Russia as that of mere puppet regimes installed by the USA, while anti-war or anti-authoritarian protests in the post-Soviet domain are framed as Western-instigated attempts at a coup d’état. Time and time again, signs of grassroots activism in Russia and elsewhere are decried as “terrorist underground movements” that receive direct Western support:

The Kiev authorities (...) opted for aggressive action [in Crimea], for activating extremist cells, including radical Islamist organizations, for sending subversives to stage terrorist attacks at critical infrastructure facilities, and for kidnapping Russian citizens. We have factual proof that such aggressive actions are being taken with support from Western security services.³⁹

This psychological projection of its own actions, wrapped in conspiracy, supports a worldview where the sovereignty of states prevails over the agency of ordinary people and small states. It expresses a belief in the immunity of leaders who are entitled to rule over people without responding to their demands. The recipe for those countries who lack the resources or the stamina to ignore the world order and manifest their sovereignty through violent oppression of others was stated by Putin in quite a vulgar way: “Like it or don’t like it – it’s your duty [to surrender – V.K.], my beauty!”⁴⁰

Putin’s rhetoric met with a lukewarm reception in the West (at best). However, his criticism of the West was far better received in the global South because it tapped into a well of anti-U.S. sentiment around the globe. The support he received produced a salient shift in Putin’s public pronouncements: he started

³⁸ “Security Council Meeting.”

³⁹ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022.

⁴⁰ “Putin and Zelensky Trade Insults at Press Conferences,” *CNN*, February 8, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/02/08/putin-insults-zelensky-crude-language-russia-ukraine-lead-marquardt-vpx.cnn>

actively using critical theory vocabulary like “hegemony,” “racism,” “the ruling class,” and even flirting with the ecological agenda. The title of his speech to the 2022 Valdai forum was “A Post-Hegemonic World: Justice and Security for Everyone.” It is an example of Putin’s conspicuous transition from a conservative to a progressive vocabulary. His listing of U.S. humanitarian interventions motivated by a “responsibility to protect” changed into a list of Western colonial exploits motivated by capitalist greed. Putin was silent about Russia’s similar endeavors. He mentions Western atrocities against Native American tribes, African colonies, and China, where “entire nations [were] hooked on drugs and purposefully exterminated (...) for the sake of grabbing land and resources, hunting people like animals.”⁴¹ The shift in rhetoric from eschatological, militant messianism to what might be called “pragmatic sovereigntism” has been accompanied by pious assertions that Russia is “minding its own business” and seeking a multi-polar world of dialogue and pragmatic collaboration.

Taking a closer look, however, one will find the same old resentment, conspiratorial mindset, and Russian messianism, along with the heroization of “activists” of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics.⁴² It is telling that the Valdai speech, trimmed as it was with leftist logic, was published on the Russian Presidency’s official website in English, while Putin’s subsequent three-hour question and answer session, delivered in a more improvised and typical Putin manner, was not. It was in the Q&A that the Russian president reiterated his anti-Western conspiracy theories and his manipulative tropes about a Donbas genocide, Maidan as a coup, and a nuclear threat allegedly emanating from Ukraine. He aimed some offensive barbs at Western politicians as well. For example, he commented on a visit to Taiwan by U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi: “Why did that granny drag herself over there?”⁴³

Another shift, which is less obvious but still indicative of the context, is that Putin has begun emulating Zelensky by evoking more positive tropes of “unity,” “the future,” and “constructive and positive solutions.”⁴⁴ This change stands in drastic contrast to previous outbursts like “Who needs a world where there is no Russia?” One after another, a parade of representatives of Asian states who

⁴¹ “Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia,” September 30, 2022, official website of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Priamaia transliatsiia vystupleniia Putina na “Valdae,” *Real’noe vremia Live*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyvi0VaUeNs&t=16592s>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

attended the Valdai Forum Q&A session declared their admiration for Russia and reported on their compatriots' great love for Putin. Their adulation might have been intended to compensate for the fresh humiliation of Zelensky's successes on the global stage. Ironically, while it provided much needed support for the Russian President from the Global South, it also reconstructed his positionality as now subaltern to Ukraine. Perhaps unconsciously, Putin recognized a kind of Ukrainian hegemony by following in the footsteps of its leader. He even labeled Ukraine's actions in the Donbas as "special operations," Putin's moniker for military actions designed to assert a nation's sovereignty.

Ukraine: The Horizontal Populism of Hope

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression, the Ukrainian leadership has faced a challenging task in the international arena, that of disentangling itself from the country's image as a perpetual Russian subaltern. In so doing, they need to prove that there are universal implications to a seemingly local conflict and engage more than just the West's humanitarian sympathy. To that end, Ukraine needed to shed its status as a *double subaltern* located in one of the world community's blind spots. Russia has long attempted to erase Ukrainian idiosyncrasies,⁴⁵ and as a result Europe has not had much knowledge about it or even interest in it. As one art critic has noted, "Amidst all the notable capitals of central-eastern European countries (and not just capitals), a glaringly blank space appears in the place of Ukraine."⁴⁶ That observation applies beyond the art world as well. Until recently, the global hierarchies of knowledge production affirmed Russia's privilege to define and articulate the identities of the regions it claimed as its own. Professor Myroslav Shkandrij invokes a lesson from history: "Realpolitik, it was said, dictated that only one powerful voice should speak for the Slavs and demanded the removal of Russia's historical competitor for this role."⁴⁷

Russia, in its long-standing role as mediator of both academic and everyday knowledge production about the former Soviet Union, presented most of the post-Soviet states as upstart statelets with limited agency – "unexpected"⁴⁸ and not full-fledged countries. As a result, Ukraine, along with other former

⁴⁵ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021, official website of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁴⁶ Kateryna Botanova, "A Blanket of Snow," *Various Artists*, June 2, 2022, <https://various-artists.com/a-blanket-of-snow/>.

⁴⁷ Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, 3.

⁴⁸ Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

subalterns of the Russian empire, was denied its history, its specificity, and – ultimately – a distinct place on mental maps of the world.⁴⁹ In a peculiar mirroring, Ukraine was treated in the West as being an “under-Russia,” i.e., a Russian periphery. Inside Russia itself, rhetoric that speaks of Ukraine as being the “anti-Russia” has been gaining momentum.⁵⁰ Only a few people were genuinely interested what Ukraine is on its own.

The catchy phrase, allegedly said by Volodymyr Zelensky on the very first days of the full-scale invasion, that “I need ammunition not a ride” brought about a landslide change in the public perception of Ukraine. It epitomized an unexpectedly steadfast (and irrational, in the eyes of many) resistance by Ukrainians to Russian aggression. It also performatively established Ukraine’s agency before the Western audience. Reports of a mass murder of civilians committed by Russian troops at Bucha shook the West’s willingness to tolerate Russian actions and opened space for new interpretations of both of the antagonists in the war. Zelensky used this window of opportunity to speak up on all possible platforms, from the Davos forum to the Cannes International Film Festival, from the European Council to the Grammy Awards, and in the parliaments of various countries from India to Estonia. He aimed to build bridges with the local contexts he found there and expose the universal meaning and broader implications of the ongoing war.

Several smart moves by Zelensky contributed to the success of his speeches. He avoided falling into the victim trap. Despite the scope and content of atrocities that traumatized not only those involved but distant observers as well, the Ukrainian President is not indulging in self-pity or excessive self-heroization. He avoids the language of revenge and retaliation, and for the most part refrains from mentioning the Kremlin directly. Set against the multiple challenges his country faces, Zelensky’s narratives are geared towards *positive emotional mobilization*, dwelling on hope for a brighter future. He calls for “a complete restoration of normal peaceful life” rather than retaliation and punishment. He chooses to talk about freedom and care: “Take care of yourself, your family, loved ones, friends. Take care of the world.”⁵¹ He even frames the current situation

⁴⁹ Olesya Khromeychuk, “Where is Ukraine?”, RSA, June 13, 2022, <https://www.thersa.org/comment/2022/06/where-is-ukraine>.

⁵⁰ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

⁵¹ “Ukrainians and Americans Have Become Much Closer: We Equally Understand the Word ‘Freedom’ – Address by the President of Ukraine to the Stanford University Community,” May 27, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayinci-j-amerikanci-stali-znachno-blizhchimi-mi-odnakovo-75421>.

as “the largest opportunity for [an] economic leap in Europe since World War II.”⁵² While sharing the horror at war crimes committed by the Russian soldiers on Ukrainian soil, Zelensky repeatedly focuses on the positive: “Ukraine has set another precedent in these three months. A precedent for the unprecedented unity of the democratic world around the emotion of genuine admiration for Ukrainian courage and around the understanding that freedom must be fought for.”⁵³ A telling, small detail is his claim that although some EU member states are skeptical of Ukraine’s push for EU membership, they are only “future optimists.”⁵⁴

Zelensky notes that current Russian policies have a salient colonial flavor, and he ridicules Putin’s neo-imperial aspirations as outdated:

The Russian leadership believes that Ukraine should be a colony of Russia. And the Ukrainians? If the nation does not want to submit, it is decided to destroy it. The occupiers are also deporting our people to Russia and settling them in various remote regions. The number of such deported Ukrainians is hundreds of thousands. And this is also one of the ways to conquer the people. In fact, it is shocking how frankly Russia is trying to bring back to world life the order of the old days, when colonizers and empires imposed their policies or their domination on other nations.⁵⁵

The above quotation demonstrates how Zelensky’s public rhetoric has gravitated towards a postcolonial approach. The Ukrainian president frames the warfare in universal terms. He is performatively establishing Ukraine’s right to participate in negotiations of a future European order. He deftly plays on the sensitivities of local audiences (different in every country) and exposes the broader implications of the crisis. Most recently, he has warned about the threat of famine in Africa and Asia caused by Russia’s blockade of Ukrainian sea ports,

⁵² “We Should Not Be Afraid to Set New Precedents – Speech by the President of Ukraine at the World Economic Forum in Davos,” May 23, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mayemo-ne-boyatisya-stvoryuvati-novi-precedenti-vistup-prezi-75293>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy During the Joint Participation with President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda in the Plenary Session of the Verkhovna Rada,” May 22, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-pid-chas-sp-75261>.

⁵⁵ “Russia’s War Against Ukraine Affects Global Situation – Address by the President of Ukraine to the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI),” May 27, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/rozvyazana-rosiyeyu-vijna-proti-ukrayini-vplivaye-na-globaln-75401>.

and a wave of migration from those regions that might affect southern Europe especially.

Zelensky calls out the hypocrisy of global decision-makers and invites them to act upon their self-declared democratic values:

There are people – and many of them among the powerful of this world – who believe that not all nations matter. Who believe that a nation can simply be forgotten to try to keep peace (...). [W]e must restore full respect for the fundamental values on our continent. We must fight absolutely clearly and at all levels for the principle: *every nation matters*. The interests of any nation cannot be ignored, betrayed or exchanged for something in a relationship with those who want to make that nation dependent on themselves. When this principle is truly respected by all, in full, then European unity will work.⁵⁶

Zelensky's own actions and the impeccable courage demonstrated by Ukrainians on a daily basis prove that European values must be practiced in real life and manifested in action.

Zelensky presents himself as a spokesperson for the Ukrainian people, but also as an advocate for neglected entities – small nations and ordinary people deprived of genuine political participation. He reminds us that people should be allowed to “choose the rules of life for themselves.” He projects that ideal onto the Russia–Ukraine standoff: “Ukraine differs from Russia *and other tyrannies* [yet another universalizing statement – V.K.] with the fact that not one person decides everything for the whole nation.”⁵⁷

The stylistic difference between the public personae of the two presidents, Zelensky and Putin, is salient. Zelensky's casual outfits, personal and emotional storytelling, and his overall self-representation as “one of us” (the “us” being now extended to ordinary people supporting universal human values everywhere) create an image that reflects the horizontal structure of Ukrainian society⁵⁸ and its appeal for cross-national solidarity. By contrast, Putin and other Russian officials stick to business suits and to highly bureaucratized vocabulary. Putin's

⁵⁶ “Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Saeima of Latvia,” May 26, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-u-saejmi-la-75385>, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ “Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Students and Rectors of Higher Educational Institutions of Ukraine,” May 19, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-do-studentiv-i-r-75173>, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ A “flattened” social structure with a weak power vertical and strong network connections.

mouthful of proclaimed goals for the “special military operation” in Ukraine (demilitarization, de-Nazification, etc.) is a telling example. The frequent references to domestic and international legal codes in Putin’s public speeches reflect a truism from Soviet times that those who know the laws are exempt from compliance with them. All in all, the image of the Russian leadership is that of the nomenklatura and not the Russian people.

Zelensky’s strategy of siding with “the people” – rhetorically and stylistically – is essentially populism, but the messages he conveys differ importantly from right-wing populist narratives. They are inclusive, horizontal, future-oriented, and dwell on hope, not fear. I suggest that Zelensky’s rhetorical strategy can be called the *populism of hope*. Zelensky claims to articulate the position of Ukrainian people, and he often provides space for their voices in his public interventions. On top of that, his public persona is that of a “human being,” not a professional politician. This allows him to speak emotionally and display “normal” human reactions when confronted with overwhelming atrocities the entire world is observing along with him.⁵⁹ Zelensky’s positionality, that of a citizen speaking on behalf of his nation that is resisting unwarranted aggression, allows him to address the populace and the political class alike, bypassing the hierarchies of power. His appeal is horizontal. He rhetorically constructs a chain of equivalence – “Ukraine – Europe – the World,” which reassembles the international community horizontally as a flattened entity. Former cleavages lose their importance. Cross-national solidarity is a prerequisite for common survival. Starting from the warning that “Russia is doing everything to break the resistance of Ukraine, the resistance of Europe and the world in 90 days of this winter,”⁶⁰ Zelensky sets the goal: “Justice for Ukraine, for Europe, [and] for the world must and will be restored.”⁶¹ He adds, “We’re consolidating the world. And I feel that the world is with us.”⁶²

⁵⁹ “Volodymyr Zelensky Interview with the Turkish Channel Habertürk,” Youtube, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YXojo0Nox4>.

⁶⁰ “Currently, The Geopolitical Configuration in the World Is Changing, But the Completion of the Unification of Europe Is Impossible Without Ukraine – Speech by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the Annual YES Meeting,” September 10, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zaraz-vidbuvayetsya-zmina-geopolitichnoyi-konfiguraciyi-u-sv-77637>.

⁶¹ “If Occupiers Flee, This Will Be the Best Option for Them – Address of President of Ukraine,” October 8, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/yaksho-okupanti-vtechut-ce-bude-najkrashij-dlya-nih-variant-78373>.

⁶² “Ukraine Cannot Be Intimidated, We United Even More Instead – Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy,” official website of the President of Ukraine, October 10, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayinu-nemozhливо-zalyakati-tilki-she-bilshe-obyednati-zve-78401>.

Those positive messages have been received enthusiastically by Zelensky's audience in the West, and are setting a trend for public political communication overall. Among other instances, Zelensky's vocabulary of "unity," "modesty," and "hope" can also be found in a resonant speech by Germany's President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Steinmeier openly named Russia a state "opposed" to Germany and a challenge to European democracy and universal values, which must be defeated, not compromised with. Admitting an epochal shift of the world's course into bitter "headwinds," the German president nevertheless employed the rhetoric of hope connected with solidarity, popular activism, and resilience: "Despite the many challenges I have mentioned, this age truly holds great opportunities for our country (...). To prevail in this time, we can build on the strength and power that we have worked to gain over the past years."⁶³ Arguably, Steinmeier's speech signified not only a landmark shift in German foreign policy, it also jumped onto Zelensky's bandwagon: the war is a challenge, which – if met with a consolidated response of those who share common values – could strengthen our democracies and bring a better future for our children.

Conclusion: Is Ukraine Winning the Recognition Game?

The ongoing Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is unfolding on the margins of the Western normative order. Kremlin officials openly claim they are waging the war against that order. Alas, it is impossible to isolate this threat. Both Russia and Ukraine recognize the normative hegemony of the West and in turn aim to be recognized as "true Europe," which entails changes in this order. While Russia calls for the re-emergence of a Europe of traditional values and national sovereignties, Ukraine campaigns for more space for the grassroots and the agency of minor nations. Russian "dark power"⁶⁴ has long played on internal weaknesses and inconsistencies in the West, effectively calling it out for the cleavages between its declared values and real practices, or, to put it differently, between material values and spiritual virtues. The Kremlin "special military operation" seeks to prove that democratic values at the core of the international liberal order are given only lip-service, and that decision-making in the West is every bit as corrupt and negligent of ordinary people's lives as in any other place labelled as "authoritarian." Russia's strategy is to expose the underlying

⁶³ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Strengthening Everything That Connects Us," official website of the Federal President, October 28, 2022, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/221028-Strengthening-everything-that-connects-us.html>.

⁶⁴ Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

hierarchies of domination, where some countries are deemed “more important” and the loss of lives in other places is “less lamentable.” The Ukrainian response pokes at the same inconsistency but instead of calling for abandoning the values altogether, it calls for realigning them with actual modes of conduct and leveling geopolitical hierarchies to reassemble them horizontally in cross-national networks of solidarity.

The peculiarity of this complex interplay of imperialism and subalternity is as follows. Russia, despite having the initial advantage in terms of resources and global sympathies, has failed to obtain the recognition it desires from the West. Yet, paradoxically, it has succeeded in rebranding itself as the avant-garde of the anti-Western postcolonial movement in the global South. At the same time, Ukraine, which before 2022 was a multiple subaltern for which others spoke, has attained global visibility and recognition by rejecting the usual *modus operandi* of a subaltern and giving itself recognition first. The freshness of the Ukrainian cause comes from the fact that – in an age of identity politics – the Ukrainians are building their polity and identity not around ethnic markers but around the very idea of democracy,⁶⁵ and national and international solidarity. By demonstrating courage and genuineness in their everyday actions, but also sticking to the idea of democracy as a people’s endeavor, Ukrainians expose the bright side of nationalism and populism, which I in this paper have called the populism of hope.

Zelensky reminds Europe: “Right now you can determine whether everything that the European Union says about itself is true. About unity in diversity, common values and the same approach to all European democracies (...). [T]his is not just a question of the aggressor’s responsibility for a particular war, but of protecting humanity as such.”⁶⁶

Slavoj Žižek seconds him on that:

What Russia is offering is a world without hypocrisy – because it is without global ethical standards, practicing just pragmatic “respect” for differences. We have seen clearly what this means when, after the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, they instantly made a deal with China. China accepts the new Afghanistan while the Taliban will ignore what China is doing to Uyghurs – this is, *in nuce*, the new

⁶⁵ Olga Onuch, “Why Ukrainians Are Rallying Around Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (October 2022): 37–46.

⁶⁶ “Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the European Council,” May 30, 2022, official website of the President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-do-yevr-75465>.

globalization advocated by Russia. And the only way to defend what is worth saving in our liberal tradition is to ruthlessly insist on its universality. The moment we apply double standards, we are no less “pragmatic” than Russia.⁶⁷

These are the two offers on the table, between which the West has to choose. It has become clear that no return to the past is feasible. Frank-Walter Steinmeier admitted this in his “epochal shift” speech, where he said that Germany’s long-cherished pacifism is no longer a solution, and his country needs “resilience and a spirit of resistance.” Moreover, he went so far as to say: “The Russian attack is an attack on all the lessons that the world had learned from the last century’s two world wars.”⁶⁸ Steinmeier’s speech signaled Zelensky’s symbolic victory in the Western public sphere. Germany has long been a strategic supporter of cooperation with Russia in the EU. The German President adopted much of the vocabulary that is omnipresent in Zelensky’s speeches: resilience, solidarity, the future, cooperation, democracy as the people’s joint endeavor. He also evoked the same chain of equivalence described by Zelensky above, where Ukraine, Germany, and the “world” are effectively “all together in this.”

Global debates around the ongoing war have exposed that Zelensky’s idea of the equivalence of national interests is desired but hardly actual. The world is no longer Eurocentric. It is striking that a resentful empire waging an unwarranted war of aggression against a former colony and peripheral state, and which seeks in its rhetoric and its actions to extinguish the Ukrainians as a separate nation, has managed to garner support among some subaltern nations around the globe. This reaction in the global South, rallying behind the figure of Putin, enables several important conclusions. First, Putin’s claim that he is fighting against the West, not just against Ukraine, has been taken either at face value or as a welcome opportunity to weaken Euro-Atlantic hegemony – and arguably both, depending on who is speaking. Secondly, in the contemporary geopolitical turmoil, coalitions are being built against common enemies rather than around shared principles. Both of these conclusions foretell grave danger for future that is being decided on the battlefield in Ukraine and on public stages across the globe. The jury is still out, and the verdict remains to be seen.

⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “We Must Stop Letting Russia Define the Terms of the Ukraine Crisis,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/23/we-must-stop-letting-russia-define-the-terms-of-the-ukraine-crisis>.

⁶⁸ Steinmeier, “Strengthening everything that connects us.”